



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION: A PRACTICABLE PROGRAMME

---

PROFESSOR GREGORY D. WALCOTT, PH.D .  
Hamline University, St. Paul, Minn.

---

In his little work on *The History of Religion*, Mr. Menzies asserts that "religion and civilization advance together." This correlation he makes very evident in connection with many primitive and national religions. His position seems to be well substantiated by the facts adduced by other students of religion and of social evolution. There is contained in it, also, a suggestion for solving the theological problem of today, as it presses upon the minds of thinking men. For it is but a step from the correlation of the religion of any nation with the civilization which that nation enjoys, to the correlation of Christianity with the civilization of our western world.

There are few thoughts more often emphasized, within distinctively Christian circles, than Christianity for the whole world. The universalism, which is a pronounced characteristic of Christianity, often expresses itself in this rather vaguely ideal way. One may well think that something of the sort will ultimately be attained. The work of Christian missions, carried on in so many quarters of the world at the present time, points in this direction. But already a qualifying thought has put in its appearance. What form will Christianity assume in the Orient? In the first outburst of missionary zeal a century ago, there was no question but that Chinese and Japanese, Indians and Malaysians, Fiji Islanders and South African Hottentots would all appropriate without modification the outlook upon life and conception of the world cherished by the respective missionaries. And this was practically the same as that which took shape in the early days of the Christian church. Such a thought, however, is being gradually abandoned for the saner view which counsels taking the gospel to foreign lands and then letting it work out its own salvation by incorporating itself, as best it may, *into* the thoughts, the feeling, and the total life of the several peoples among

whom it is introduced. But if this be done in the fullest, freest way possible, there will ultimately be a pronounced similarity, since there are other causes at work.

It is not hard to look forward through the centuries and to conceive of practically one type of culture prevailing everywhere in the world. Students of society in its early forms point out many similarities not to be accounted for upon the ground of imitation and borrowing. The human mind works according to very definite laws. If conditions are similar, results will be strikingly alike in spite of minor local differences. When, therefore, in addition to such a natural tendency there shall be a more pronounced similarity in data, that is, when men in every part of the world shall have about the same knowledge of the earth and its geological history, of the heavenly bodies and their laws, and of life and its history in both its lower and higher forms—when, in a word, the different cultures become merged into one—we may well think that men everywhere will have about the same conception of the world as a whole, as we in the western hemisphere for the most part have today.

No little advance in this direction has already been made. One need but contrast the *Weltanschauung* of the German tribes at the dawn of the Christian era with that entertained by a Marcus Aurelius, and then think of the unity of view, in its broad outlines, entertained by men practically everywhere in Europe and in America at the present day, to appreciate the possibilities which the centuries hold in solution. And if there should be such a uniform culture extended throughout the world and a religion correlated with it, that religion would be practically the same whether one should come into contact with it in America, in Asia, or in Africa. Still further, if Christianity be allowed to develop freely, correlated in every mission field with the type of culture which there prevails, but changing as that culture changes, when the culture becomes uniform throughout the world, Christianity will be the religion so universally correlated, and its present ideal universalism will be real.

Such a desideratum, if it be one, is not upon the horizon of present possibilities. But although this be true, it does not follow that no effort should be put forth in that direction. In fact, the argument in favor of the free development of Christianity on distant mission

fields is equally potent when applied to our western civilization. Following the principle apparent in all primitive and national religions, Christianity should be correlated with the culture of our western world.

That such a correlation exists in part, is quite evident to thoughtful observers. That there has been such a correlation in the past, is well known to students of church history. But that there is any thoroughgoing correlation upon the thought side, which may be regarded as distinctively theological, there can hardly be any discussion. The whole educational system of the West, with the exception of Catholic institutions, presents a scientific world-view. In elementary and secondary schools, and in institutions of higher learning, with few exceptions, this is the trend. Most of the literature of the age of every description gives evidence of the same general attitude. So far as men and women become educated at all, putting the matter broadly, it is a modern *Weltanschauung* which they gain. The theology of the western world, however, is correlated with a different world-scheme. Historically considered, there can be no question that Hebrew and early Christian thought became amalgamated with Greek thought. The voice is undoubtedly the voice of the Nazarene, but the form is Platonic and Aristotelian, or more precisely neo-Platonic. There is, consequently, a disharmony, a lack of proper co-ordination between theological presuppositions and modern cosmic conceptions. Men breathe one atmosphere in the schools and in daily life, but a far different one in their churches and church life.

To some this very difference seems a virtue, but it betokens a lack of power. "No man can serve two masters." It is said with truth that Luther showed the people of his day that it was possible to appropriate humanism and yet be good Christians. It was then that the Reformation was born. A partial correlation between Christianity and a modern world-view was then effected, and with no very great degree of difficulty, since what was modern at that time was quite largely a rehabilitation of what was old. In consequence, power was quite evident within one branch of the church. The task is far more difficult today, but none the less essential. Just so soon as a fairly adequate correlation shall be effected between

what is vital in Christianity and the modern view of the world, we may predict a manifestation of power commensurate with what there has been in the past.

As already suggested, when viewed historically, it is seen that there was a very complete union of Christian thought and Greek philosophy established in the early centuries of our era. To some it seems like a necessary union. But why necessary? Necessary then, perhaps, upon the same principle as a new union is now advocated. But one could hardly say necessary in an absolute sense. What is there more sacred about Plato and Aristotle than about Kant and Hegel, and many another careful scientific investigator of today? The task that presses to the front is to appraise anew the whole body of Christian thought, especially the thought, feeling, and life of the Founder of this one of the "two greatest popular world-religions," separate what is clearly Christian from its union, often called an unholy one, with Greek philosophy, and then join it in new wedlock with modern scientific-philosophical thought. In this way, a fairly good correlation could be secured between Christianity and the culture which is rather evenly distributed throughout Europe and America, and the present Janus-faced monstrosity would have a quiet death and decent burial, while the teachings of Jesus would have a new day of power and of unsurpassed influence.

Such a suggestion as this to meet the present situation is not without precedent. Practically the same kind of change was effected in the Middle Ages. In the first period, that is until about the year 1200 A.D., the philosophy of Plato was most prominent. So far as any correlation was attempted between theological and philosophical views, it was with Platonism. But in the second period of scholasticism, under the skilful manipulation of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, theology was divorced from Platonism and a union with Aristotelianism was effected. It is true that Aristotle was not so well understood then as later, but the substitution was made, and down to the present day there has been a close correlation between theology and the world-view of Aristotle within the Roman church.

It is also true that Luther, Augustinian monk as he was and, in consequence, favorably disposed to Augustine whose philosophical bias was, in the main, Platonic, and at the same time opposed as he

was to the Aristotelianism in the church, was inclined to undo the work of Albertus and Thomas and to re-establish the correlation with Platonism. This, though a backward step, was worth while in his day. One could hardly say, however, that what he did was a *fait accompli* to last forever. But such a shifting of the philosophic background readily paves the way for the substitution of the modern scientific-philosophic world-view in place of both Plato and Aristotle.

Not that there would be nothing in common between the teaching of Jesus and of the early church, and the conception prevalent today outside of distinctively theological circles. Neo-Platonism, which some students maintain might just as well be called neo-Aristotelianism,<sup>1</sup> has in it elements of both Plato and Aristotle. Not very difficult was it, then, to emphasize, now Plato and now Aristotle, in connection with church doctrines, since these had originally been formed in conjunction with neo-Platonism. There was and is an inner harmony. But while it is true that there is much in the modern *Weltanschauung* different from the thoughts of 2,000 years ago, it is also true that no small amount of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, of the Stoics, and of the Epicureans is present even yet. A new combination has been made from material partly new and partly old. Consequently there is no good reason to suppose that Christianity upon its thought side could not combine with the modern view, any more than to suppose that it could not originally combine with the views of the early philosophers. It did become correlated with that ancient world-view, in spite of vigorous opposition, and served the world, at times rather haltingly, for nearly two millennia. A new correlation, though opposed today, is demanded in the interest both of Christianity itself and of the world which it serves.

Such a union, as is here suggested, might be all the more easily effected in view of the fundamental inner harmony between Hebrew, and consequently Christian, thought and feeling on the one hand, and the thought of our western world as a whole upon the other. While the Hebrew is Semitic and our western world, in the main, Aryan, there is a temper of mind characterizing both which is fundamentally the same in each.

A very striking parallel is sometimes pointed out between Indian

<sup>1</sup> Erdmann, *History of Philosophy*, p. 236.

and Greek thought, and Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> A parallel there is, and yet one with a contrast. It is asserted that the early Indian outlook upon life was decidedly optimistic. Everything that lived and moved was a manifestation of the divine, and God was good. But when drought, famine, and pestilence came, and all "the weary weight of this unintelligible world" rested heavily upon them, the thinkers at least made a complete right-about-face in their theory of things. No longer was the world good, or the Deity just and kind. Existence was an evil and non-being became deified.

OM MANI PADME HUM, the sunrise comes!  
The dewdrop slips into the shining sea!

Pessimism of the darkest type became the truest philosophy of life, and the darkness had no softening gleam. Not very different was it with the Greeks. From the optimism of the Homeric Age, when all was sunshine and zephyr breezes, men in their thinking reached the pessimism of Plato. The world of Becoming is an illusion, the body but the prison-house of the soul, the soul's true life is to be found in the world of Being, the happy hunting-ground of hypostatized ideas. So, too, was it, in part, with the Hebrews. Their literature tells of the Garden of Eden in which men walked and talked with God, but evil shut down upon the lives of men, and in their despondency they "hung their harps upon the willows and refused to sing the songs of Zion. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity." But at this point the parallel ceases. "I had fainted," says the Psalmist, "had I not believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." All the dark side of life speaks from this verse, and yet a strong all-conquering hope discloses itself. Out of this hopefulness, one might well say, the conception of the Messiah was born. And it is this hopefulness that many students of Hebrew thought and life emphasize today. The Hebrews were men of this world, interested in its development and in their own welfare within its confines. Not yet had "homesickness of the soul" or thinking over-much completely paralyzed their native tendency to vigorous action. Not a little of this hopefulness did Jesus take over and emphasize in his own religious life and in that of his followers. It was his birthright, and Christianity inherits it from him.

<sup>2</sup> O. Pfeleiderer, *Philosophy and Development of Religion*, Vol. I, pp. 299-312.

Not infrequently it is also pointed out that hopefulness is a prominent characteristic of western thinking. Aside from the Greek pessimism just referred to, there has always been a tendency in the West to strive to solve the problem of life. In the East there is the conception of a mighty external force, controlling, dominating, at times crushing human life. It is *kismet* which one may not circumvent, let him try never so hard. In the West it is the will-o'-the-wisp, final cause. The western thinker may feel that all his efforts will be in vain, that the problem of life is insoluble, but none the less he will strive and struggle onward. He sees the "magic shadow-shapes" coming and going just over the distant western horizon. It may be a mirage, but he struggles on, hoping, expecting, believing, failing, yet ever trying again. In the East the problem is given up in despair; in the West hope springs new-born with every rising sun.

There is, therefore, a fundamental unity between the Hebrew and the Greek, the Christian and the Aryan, the thought and attitude of the Carpenter's Son and the thought and attitude of the profoundest thinkers in the West. So long as hope dwells perennially in the breasts of western thinkers—and who will say that it has yet ceased to exist?—so long will a vital union be possible between what was deepest and truest in the Son of Man and the deepest and truest thinking of Europeans. The old union of Greek and Christian thought may be dissolved, should be dissolved, but the new union, here proposed, can be effected, not only without loss of power but with a great increase of it. In such a new correlation between Christianity and our western world, a correlation of thought as well as of other sides of our complex life, will the largest immediate and future welfare of the religious life of the West, and of the church as a whole, be secured.